

Speaking in Tongues: Why the Modern Practice is Unscriptural and Potentially Harmful

by Jeremy James



Introduction

This paper examines the gift of the Holy Spirit known as 'speaking in tongues', with particular reference to its scriptural purpose and whether it is still being given to believers.

The Bible has strict rules for speaking in tongues, yet few Christians seem to know what they are. Since the Holy Spirit never acts contrary to anything in Scripture, these rules must be observed whenever anyone speaks in tongues, or presumes to do so. Any manifestation of tongues that fails to comply with these rules – the rules set by the Holy Spirit – must therefore be counterfeit.

We deal only with tongues as an observable, public phenomenon. Its role, if any, in the prayer closet is not addressed. While some Christians claim to speak in tongues occasionally during their private prayers, we do not address this claim anywhere in our paper and offer no comment as to its validity.

Background

At the outset I should acknowledge that speaking in tongues – or *glossolalia* as it is sometimes known – is a very sensitive issue among professing Christians, notably Pentecostals/Charismatics. Practitioners greatly resent any criticism of the practice, while many non-practitioners see it as a foolish activity and possibly even harmful to the individual. It is certainly a topic that gives rise to highly polarised views. As a result, there is a marked reluctance among practitioners to examine the matter as they should, closely and systematically, from a strictly Scriptural perspective.

Before I was saved, I was struck by the close similarity between Christian 'tongues' and various shamanic and pagan religious practices where rhythmic chanting and trance vocalisation were employed. This gave rise to many questions. For example, how was one to distinguish between the 'spirit filled' state of a Christian who claimed to be speaking in tongues and the ecstatic utterances of a trance medium?

The modern practice of tongues usually occurs spontaneously when practitioners, both male and female, come together as a group to engage in communal prayer. Those who were moved to do so repeat a series of syllables in a continuous stream of sound, the meaning of which is unknown either to the speaker himself or to anyone listening. Practitioners usually claim that the syllables are part of a spiritual or angelic language whose meaning is known only to God. Furthermore they claim that praying in tongues must be especially pleasing to Him since the syllables themselves are produced by the action of the Holy Spirit.

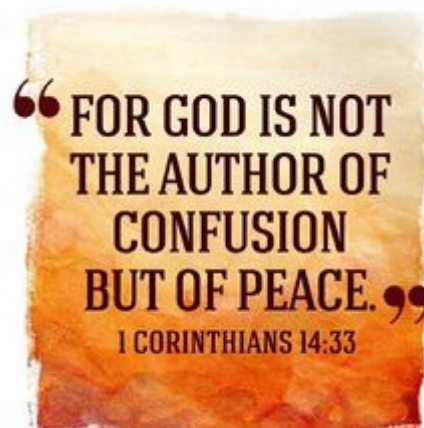
A Baptist Minister Speaks Out

In the course of my research I came across a revealing article by an Australian Baptist Minister who, from long experience, saw fit to make the following arresting observations:

Among the great delusions that are spreading today, there is none more subtle or more dangerous than modern-day tongues. It has been my experience over many years to observe that out of the masses of people coming under the influence of the tongues phenomena, very few escape without serious emotional and spiritual damage to themselves and their families...

I and others have been testing tongues in Australia for some years. In fact, there are men personally known to me who have been testing them for over 20 years and none of us has ever yet found a genuine gift of Biblical Tongues. When the spirit using the tongue is commanded to identify itself, in 95% of cases, a demon answers...The other 5% have prove[d] to be psychosomatic. [Bryce Hartin, *Today's Tongues*, 1987, Third Edition 1993]

If Pastor Hartin is correct, then his assessment of the 'tongues' phenomenon ought to be of great concern to all Bible-believing Christians.



At the time I was saved I had been 33 years in the New Age movement, where deceiving spirits are rampant. Later, after I met and spoke with many Christians for the first time, I was struck by how ignorant they were of the activity – and even the existence – of deceiving spirits. Pastor Hartin's assessment may have upset many Christians, but his words rang true.

The Greek and Hebrew words for *tongues* or *languages*

Anyone who believes that he or she can exercise the gift of tongues needs to look very carefully at its Biblical purpose. How can one possibly exercise a gift without first knowing its purpose and the role it serves – or once served – in God's plan of redemption for mankind?

It is depressing to note that most Christians derive their understanding of this phenomenon entirely from the New Testament and fail to take into account some key references in the Old Testament.

Before examining these, we need to look at the word "tongues" itself. It is translated into English from the Hebrew word *lâshôwn* and the Greek words *diálektos* and *glōssa*. All three mean 'language' – an understandable human language, not just arbitrary sounds or syllables. The following examples show clearly how each of these words denotes an existing human language:

HEBREW: *lâshôwn*

"These are the sons of Ham, after their families, after their tongues [*lâshôwn*], in their countries, and in their nations." (Genesis 10:20)

"...and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue [*lâshôwn*] of the Chaldeans." (Daniel 1:4)

GREEK: *diálektos*

"...that field is called in their proper tongue [*diálektos*], Aceldama, that is to say, The field of blood." (Acts 1:19)

"And when there was made a great silence, he spake unto them in the Hebrew [*Hebraïs*] tongue [*diálektos*] ..." (Acts 21:40)

GREEK: *glōssa*

"My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue [*glōssa*]; but in deed and in truth." (1 John 3:18)

"And he said unto me, Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues [*glōssa*], and kings." (Revelation 10:11)

It is obvious that these terms mean a spoken *language*. We cannot bend the accepted meaning of words in Hebrew or Greek to suit our purpose. If they plainly denote a standard concept, then they cannot and should not be made to mean something else.

Some Pentecostals try to get around this by citing 1 Corinthians 13:1 as evidence that tongues [*glōssa*] can also mean a language that is not normally intelligible to mankind, namely the language spoken by angels:

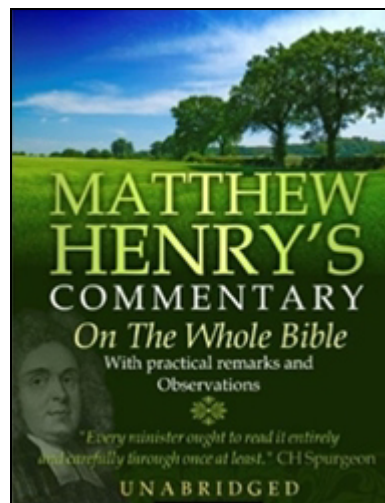
**"Though I speak with the tongues [*glōssa*] of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal."
(1 Corinthians 13:1)**

Pentecostals take this verse to mean (a) that an angelic language exists and (b) that Paul was claiming to be able to speak it (by supernatural means). But this is a completely erroneous interpretation of what this verse is actually saying. While it may be the case that angels speak an angelic language, Paul is definitely not claiming to be able to speak it. Rather he is using a common literary device known as hyperbole, where a feature is exaggerated or postulated for purposes of emphasis.

This verse opens the famous chapter on love (*agape*) in 1 Corinthians. In it Paul highlights the centrality of love in the Christian life and shows how even the most exalted gifts amount to nothing if love is not present. He is not speaking about himself but about **any** person who has given his heart to Christ. Here is how two Christian commentators expound the text. Both lived before the modern practice of tongue-speaking became established and thus had no incentive to interpret the verse one way or another:

Could a man speak all the languages on earth, and that with the greatest propriety, elegance, and fluency, could he talk like an angel, and yet be without charity, it would be all empty noise, mere unharmonious and useless sound, that would neither profit nor delight. It is not talking freely, nor finely, nor learnedly, of the things of God, that will save ourselves, or profit others, if we are destitute of holy love. – **Matthew Henry [born 1662]**, *commentary on 1 Corinthians 13:1*

Though I could express myself, or communicate my mind to others, in the most excellent way, or in the greatest variety of expression, yet if I have not *agape*, which we translate, *charity*...I am but *as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal*, that is, I only make a noise, but it will conduce nothing to my salvation, it will be of no use to me – **Matthew Poole [born 1624]**, *commentary on 1 Corinthians 13:1*



In short Paul is telling us that, even if a person could speak the language of angels, and yet lacked love, he would sound no better than a jarring brass instrument.

When one reads the verse in context, the meaning is clear. It is only when we lift it out of context and change the meaning of the word *glossa* that it can be construed to mean something else.

Pentecostals also like to quote 1 Corinthians 14:2 in support of their 'angelic language' theory of tongues:

"For he that speaketh in an *unknown* tongue [*glōssa*] speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries." (1 Corinthians 14:2)

Their interpretation in this instance is also erroneous. Firstly the word 'unknown' is not found in the original Greek text but was added by the translators of the KJV to make the sense a little clearer. By 'unknown tongue' they meant 'a foreign language', not a language whose meaning was unknown to any nation on earth, or known only to God.

The word *glōssa* has exactly the same meaning in this verse as it has in the other verses we have cited. Paul is not referring to an angelic or heavenly language that only God can understand. Rather he is saying that a believer who speaks in a foreign language will be understood **only** by God **if** there is no-one else present in the assembly to interpret what is being said, even though he may be sharing deep spiritual truths. The interpretation of tongues could be given either by someone who knows the foreign language in question or is supernaturally enabled by the Holy Spirit in that moment to correctly interpret or expound what was said. In short, without interpretation no-one is edified, not even the person who spoke in tongues.

The Spiritual Purpose of Tongues

The points we have made so far are a strong indication that the modern practice of tongue-speaking is counterfeit. A stream of meaningless syllables repeated *ad nauseum* is not a language at all, but merely a noise.

If we take the trouble to examine the spiritual purpose of tongues, using the totality of God's Word to guide us – as we should – we will see the miracle of Pentecost in an entirely new light.

The three key verses are:

"The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue [*lāshōwn*] thou shalt not understand" (Deuteronomy 28:49)

"For with stammering lips and another tongue [*lāshōwn*] will he speak to this people." (Isaiah 28:11)

"Thou shalt not see a fierce people, a people of a deeper speech [*sāphâh*] than thou canst perceive; of a stammering tongue [*lāshōwn*], that thou canst not understand." (Isaiah 33:19)

In Deuteronomy 28 and Isaiah 33 the LORD is referring to the conquest of Israel by a foreign army, a heathen people whose language the Jews would not understand. If they continued in their disobedience then they would come under judgment from God and expelled from their homeland.

The verse from Isaiah 28 is so important that Paul cites it in the chapter on tongues in 1 Corinthians:

"In the law it is written, With men of other tongues [*heteroglōssos*] and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord." (1 Corinthians 14:21)

The meaning here is very plain. God had spoken at length to the Chosen People through His prophets in the Hebrew tongue and recorded His message to them in the Scriptures, again in the Hebrew tongue, but they would not listen. Isaiah is telling them that a time would come when they would hear their own Scriptures quoted by Gentiles speaking in a foreign language ("**other lips**", "**stammering lips**"), and even then – even then! – they will not hear His message.



The Great Isaiah Scroll (Israel Museum)

The events prophesied in this verse (Isaiah 28:11) had come to pass, as Paul confirmed, with the advent of the spiritual gift of tongues. This was first given on the day of Pentecost when the Apostles recited supernaturally "**the wonderful works of God**" in the foreign languages spoken by or known to the many thousands of Jews who were visiting Jerusalem for the feast:

"And how hear we every man in our own tongue [*diálektos*], wherein we were born?" (Acts 2:8)

To appreciate the full significance of this from a Jewish standpoint, we must see how it was connected in their minds with Deuteronomy 28 and Isaiah 33. Both verses associated foreign languages with the severity of God's judgment. Even the creation of foreign languages in the first place was a result of the LORD's decisive judgment of the rebels at Babel. The Jews who were present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and heard the Apostles reciting "**the wonderful works of God**" (which would likely have consisted mainly of Scripture) would have been struck by the prophetic significance of what they were witnessing. They would have known that Jews who rejected the message – especially in light of Isaiah 28:11 – would reap God's judgment.

In conjunction with Peter's sermon, this made such a powerful impression on them that three thousand souls were added to the church that same day. If one considers that the church at that time probably comprised just over five hundred souls, these few hours saw a remarkable sevenfold increase in her membership.

Tongues are a sign to unbelieving Jews

Pentecost was a major turning point in the history for believing Jews. By the same token, it was also a highly significant day for unbelieving Jews. The same gospel that brought salvation to those who believed would bring judgment on those who did not believe.

This is why Paul states specifically that the gift of tongues was intended by God as a sign to unbelieving Jews:

**"Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe,
but to them that believe not:" (1 Corinthians 14:22)**

Tongues served as a witness or sign to the Jews that they were being judged as a nation. Hitherto they were a chosen people, a people set apart. Their God, the LORD God of Israel, was utterly different from the gods of all other nations. All foreigners, without exception, were unclean, heathen idolators who lived under a curse. The Jews knew that they were special in a way that the rest of mankind could barely understand. For this reason they assumed – wrongly – that Gentiles would **never** be accepted by the LORD God of Israel, the God of the Jews. As they saw it a Gentile could only be saved by converting to Judaism and losing his Gentile identity.

This attitude, which permeated Jewish culture and the whole of traditional rabbinical thinking, is demonstrated in the most remarkable way in the story of the prophet Jonah. The LORD called him to warn a pagan nation – the people of Nineveh – of an impending calamity. Unless they repented of their ways, their city would be destroyed. Jonah was extremely unhappy with this directive and tried to avoid carrying it out. To him it was simply unthinkable that the God of Israel should take any interest whatever in the welfare of a pagan people, especially the cruel and rapacious inhabitants of Nineveh (a city founded by Nimrod).

Even after the LORD dragged him to Nineveh, where he delivered his message, he sat outside the city, waiting daily for its destruction – a prospect he relished. And when it didn't happen, he was very angry!

This may seem like an unusually hard attitude to us today, but it highlighted the exclusive right of ownership which the Jewish people believed they exercised over the LORD God of Israel. He was *their* God, and theirs alone.

This turned out to be a major problem when the Apostles began to preach the Gospel to the Jews. The initial members of the early Church were all Jews and many carried with them exactly the same attitude to Gentiles that had been held tenaciously for centuries by their forefathers. In their view, the Church should remain exclusively Jewish. The idea that Gentiles – pagans, foreigners – should be allowed to participate on an equal footing was repellant to many of them. Even the Apostles struggled with this and, as the Book of Acts reveals, they would have restricted the Church to the circumcised (Jews only) had not Paul of Tarsus come along and convinced them that Christ died for the whole world, and not just the Jews.

It should be remembered that Paul had to publicly rebuke Peter, perhaps the most senior of the Apostles, because he still clung to practices that set the Jew above the Gentile: **"But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed."** (Galatians 2:11)

Paul had to work very hard to convince the Jews. He would have made slow progress if, when he presented his case, the early Christians (all of whom were Jews) had not already observed something that had astounded them, namely the spiritual gift of tongues – the very sign that Moses and Isaiah had prophesied. They had witnessed the Holy Spirit speaking the Word of God in the language of foreign nations. This could only mean that God was inviting Gentiles into His fold.

The Jews needed a sign (1 Corinthians 1:22) and the sign was tongues.

Jonah preaching at Nineveh



Specific references to Tongues in the New Testament

The Old Testament references to "tongues" tell us (a) that they were regarded by the Jews as real languages and (b) that they were closely associated with God's judgment of Israel.

We will now examine each of the five references to tongues in the New Testament, namely:

Mark 16:17

Acts 10:46

Acts 19:6

Acts 2:1-12

1 Corinthians 12-14.

Mark 16:15-17

"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues [*glōssa*] ..." (Mark 16:15-17)

Note that Christ, like Paul, refers to tongues as a sign.

Christ never spoke in tongues, but here he is saying that those who **"believe"** (namely his disciples) will go **"into all the world"** and **"speak with new tongues."** The context strongly suggests that the **"tongues"** in question were the languages spoken in other parts of the world. As we have already seen, the Greek word for **"tongues"** is *glossa*, which means languages. These are actual languages, not made-up languages, heavenly languages, or mystical languages. The context makes it quite clear that Christ wanted his disciples to preach the gospel to other nations, and to make sure that it was understood. It is impossible to give a new meaning to the word *glōssa* in this context and make it signify the meaningless babble found among modern practitioners of tongues.



The delegation from Cornelius inviting Peter to Caesarea.

Acts 10:46

"While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision [i.e. *Jews*] which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues [*glōssa*], and magnify [glorify, praise] God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" (Acts 10:44-47)

This is the wonderful occasion when the first Gentile – Cornelius – was baptized. The Jewish Christians who were present were "**astonished**" because they had never imagined that the Holy Spirit would enter non-Jews. This meant that the LORD God of Israel was declaring Himself the God of all nations and not just the Jews. And how did they know for sure that the Holy Spirit had entered these Gentiles? Because they heard them speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues was a sign to the Jews that the God of Israel was accepting people from all races, tribes, peoples and tongues.

It is vital to understand the significance of this event. For about two thousand years the Jews as a nation had been the exclusive representatives on earth of the One True God. Now a truly dramatic change had come about, something which the Jews had never expected (though they should have discerned the possibility from their Scriptures). From that day forward the LORD God would actively choose representatives from among all nations.

The nation of Israel, as a nation, had temporarily ceased to represent Him. Instead He was now represented exclusively by a new body, the church, which comprised (a) Jews who believed in Christ, (b) Gentiles who believed in Christ, (c) Samaritans who believed in Christ (the Samaritans were a racially mixed group with both Jewish and Gentile ancestors), and (d) the group mentioned in Acts 19:6 (see below).

Many scriptures, such as Zechariah chapters 12-14, confirm that the righteous remnant among the Jews as a nation will be restored to their priestly position when Christ returns at the start of the Millennium to reign in Jerusalem.

Tongues as a sign of judgment

The Jews needed a sign. In this instance – where Israel had ceased temporarily to be the representative nation of God on earth – they needed irrefutable evidence that this dramatic, even traumatic, transition had taken place. The evidence was tongues. Once they heard their own Scriptures spoken and interpreted supernaturally by Gentiles, they knew that God was now working with individual believing Gentiles, just as He was working with individual believing Jews – but not with the nation of Israel.

The judgment implied by this sign came crashing down upon the nation of Israel in 70 AD when the Temple was destroyed.



The fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Acts 19:6

"Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues [*glōssa*], and prophesied. And all the men were about twelve." (Acts 19:4-7)

This was the occasion when, on a visit to Ephesus, Paul came upon a group of men, possibly Gentiles, who had been baptized some years earlier by John the Baptist. Since they had not had a Christian baptism, Paul proceeded to baptize them. When the Holy Spirit came upon them, they too began to speak in tongues. The Jews who were present (or who heard reports of this event) were left in no doubt that the Holy Spirit was working among them. These converts could be heard speaking inspired words of truth in a foreign language. This was clear confirmation that the LORD God of Israel was not just the God of the Jews, but the God of all nations and people and tongues.

Acts 2:1-12

"And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this?"

We will now examine the best known instance of tongues, namely that of Pentecost.

Consider the following facts: All who heard these supernatural tongues were Jews. They had come to Jerusalem from different parts of the Empire to participate in the festival of Shavuot [Weeks or Pentecost]. As Jews they probably spoke one of the languages common among Jews at that time – Aramaic, Greek or Hebrew. Thus it is fair to say that the Apostles would not have needed to speak in "tongues" in order to communicate with most of them. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit spoke words of truth through the mouths of the Apostles in the language of the province or region from which each visitor had come. These Jews were greatly surprised to hear praise for the LORD God of Israel in a pagan tongue! Nothing like this had ever happened before.

The Bible lists the Gentile regions concerned in order to emphasize the diversity of language involved and the remarkable nature of what was happening. They included regions which today are in Turkey, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Egypt, Libya, Crete, and Arabia.

Just think, within minutes of the Holy Spirit coming into the world to dwell in the hearts of men, He was speaking to Jews, not in the language of Jews, but in the language of Gentiles. And yet everything He said pertained to the Jews and the holy scriptures of Israel.

This was the sign that Paul spoke about in Acts, which he confirmed was the very sign that the prophet Isaiah had foretold over 700 years earlier (Isaiah 28:11). It was also one of the signs that Jesus gave in Mark 16.

Background to 1 Corinthians

Before proceeding to examine the doctrine of tongues as explained by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, let's summarise what we have found so far:

- speaking in tongues was a sign to unbelieving Jews;
- the sign had been foretold by Moses and Isaiah;
- the sign was associated with God's judgment;
- the tongues spoken were actual earthly languages.

In order to understand Paul's comments about tongues in 1 Corinthians, we need to understand his overall purpose in writing the letter. He had been informed that the Christians in Corinth had departed in many respects from the precepts that he had given them and he wanted by means of this letter to get them back on track. It is clear from his various comments that the Corinthian church was far from satisfactory in the way it conducted its affairs. Its members were abusing their spiritual gifts, tolerating immoral practices, and suffering from "**envyings, and strife, and divisions**" (3:3) Thus his comments in relation to tongues were designed to correct misunderstandings among them in relation to tongues (among other things) and to ensure that henceforth they would exercise the gift of tongues only in accordance with the strict code set out in his letter.

We'll now proceed to examine the relevant passages, verse by verse, and see exactly what Paul was teaching the Corinthians. This should allow us to establish the Biblical doctrine of tongues.

Observation #1

"Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit... For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit..." (1 Corinthians 12:4 & 8)

In chapter 12 he explains that there is a diversity of spiritual gifts and that these are distributed as required within the church. Thus the gift of speaking in tongues can be possessed by only some members of the church.



Observation #2

Chapter 12 also mentions the interpretation of tongues as a spiritual gift: **"For to one is given by the Spirit... the interpretation of tongues."**

It is difficult to say whether the speaker of tongues necessarily understood on all occasions the literal meaning of what he was saying. However, if a person has mastered a language by patient study, he would obviously understand the meaning of the words spoken by him in that language. Equally, if speaking in tongues supernaturally was truly a gift from the Holy Spirit, then one would expect the gift to have the same characteristic and thus be intelligible to the speaker.

It has long been assumed that the speaker of supernatural tongues did not understand the actual meaning of what he said because Paul speaks of another, related, spiritual gift, namely the gift of interpreting tongues. The Greek word was *diermēneuō*, meaning to interpret or expound. Pentecostals (and others) have taken this gift to entail the translation of the words spoken by the speaker of supernatural tongues, presumably for the edification of those members of the assembly who did not understand the foreign language being spoken. However, this may not have been the case. The word *diermēneuō* also means "to expound". For example, when Jesus met the pair on the road to Emmaus, he expounded the scriptures (*diermēneuō*) for their benefit. Since supernatural tongues conveyed mysteries (**"howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries."** - 1 Corinthians 14:2) the spiritual content of what was being said may not have been fully understood, even by the speaker. Thus, in order to be edified, the assembly would need another person with the gift of interpreting tongues to explain what the inspired utterance meant in a spiritual or theological sense.

Irrespective of whether *diermēneuō* means "to translate" or "to expound" in this context, it is clear that Paul is speaking of a spiritual gift that was separate and distinct from the gift of tongues. Furthermore, as we shall see when we examine chapter 14, a person with that gift must be present in the assembly if the tongues speaker himself is unable to interpret his own inspired utterance.

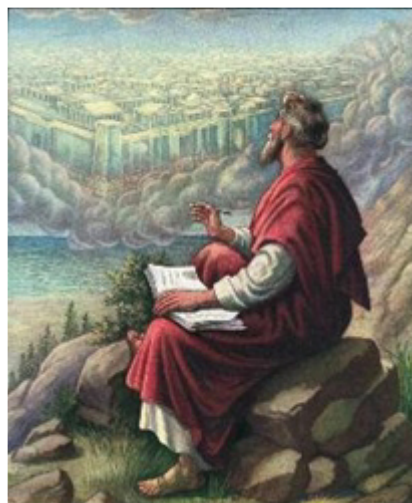
Observation #3

"Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away." (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)

In the previous chapter Paul had listed nine gifts of the Holy Spirit – wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracle working, prophecy, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. Then in verses 13: 8-9 he reveals that three of them will pass away **"when that which is perfect is come."**

Many Bible scholars believe that Paul is referring to the completion of the Bible. At the time he was writing, the Bible was still **"that which is in part,"** namely incomplete. The three revelatory gifts which he says will pass away were the very three that were needed to complete the Bible – namely divinely revealed knowledge, prophecy, and revelation given through the gift of tongues.

Even if one is not convinced that Paul was referring to the completion of the Bible in verse 13:10, he was clearly setting a time limit on the continued use of three of the nine spiritual gifts – prophecy, tongues, and the revealed word of knowledge. Given that the records left by Christians of the post-Apostolic era make almost no reference to the continued manifestation of tongues after 96 AD, when John wrote the last book of the Bible on the island of Patmos, it is reasonable to conclude that the Holy Spirit was no longer granting it. Indeed it probably ceased in 70 AD with the culmination of the judgment implied by the sign of tongues, namely the fall of Jerusalem and the complete destruction of the Temple.



John at Patmos

Observation #4

"Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy. For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries. But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church." (1 Corinthians 14:1-4)

We have already discussed this passage. It should be remembered that Paul is writing to the Corinthians to correct a number of errors and misunderstandings among them. One of these related to their practice of tongues without having someone present to expound or interpret what was said. The passage refers, not to an angelic language which only God can understand, but to a foreign earthly language which seemingly no-one present could understand. So, while the church member was speaking in tongues, sharing divine knowledge in a foreign language, he was actually doing nothing that would benefit anyone present. The other members who were present received neither edification nor exhortation nor comfort.

Observation #5

"I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying. Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine? And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me. Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church."

(1 Corinthians 14:5-12)

Webster's Dictionary (1828), which rigorously catalogued the language of the King James Bible, defined the verb '**to edify**' as follows: 'To instruct and improve the mind in knowledge generally, and particularly in moral and religious knowledge, in faith and holiness.'

Verses 1-12 conveyed a strong message to the Corinthians. Paul was trying to impress upon them that every word spoken in church should be aimed in some way at "edifying" everyone present. They should promote knowledge, faith, and holiness. They should exhort, comfort and strengthen believers in their Christian lives. The Corinthians were violating this principle by using the gift of tongues to speak truths that no-one could understand. This had to stop.

Observation #6

The next five verses develop the doctrine of tongues a little further:

"Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified. (1 Corinthians 14:13-17)



Why would a person who was speaking a foreign language have to pray **"that he may interpret"**? This is easily explained if we realize that the "unknown tongue" was unknown only to the audience and not to the speaker. Rather, the challenge for the speaker was to find the right words in the local language so that the substance of what he had just said could be explained to those in attendance. Paul was advising that, in such instances, the speaker should pray to the Holy Spirit (presumably in advance) for the ability to find those words.

These verses draw attention to the diversity of languages that were spoken in Corinth, a busy cosmopolitan city with citizens from many parts of the empire. Within the space of a few square miles one would likely find ten or fifteen spoken languages, each of which was a "foreign language" to someone else. Thus, in a church comprising members from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, with mixed levels of educational attainment, it was absolutely vital that everyone received the same religious instruction. Paul was fully aware of the confusion that could result if the Corinthian church did not sort out this problem.

His advice was typically practical – whether through spiritual gifts or through conventional learning, whether through one's own endeavors or with the help of another person – they were always to ensure that everything that was said was understood by everyone in the assembly.

This is consistent with the letter as a whole, where the principal aim throughout is to resolve practical difficulties among the Corinthians and edify the church.

"I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all: Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men." (1 Corinthians 14:18-20)

He continues in the same vein in verses 18-20, where he even exhorts the Corinthians to give up their childish habit of preaching in a language that the assembly cannot understand.

Observation #7

"In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe." (1 Corinthians 14:21-22)

Paul is referring here to Isaiah 28:11-12, which we have already discussed. He is confirming that speaking in tongues (supernaturally) is sign to the Jews ("**this people**"). Since Isaiah refers specifically to the *unbelief* of the Jewish people ("**and yet for all that they will not hear me**"), this is the unbelief that Paul is speaking of.

An unconverted Jew might have been impressed by an inspired utterance (prophecy), but to witness someone speaking supernaturally about the LORD God of Israel in a Gentile tongue would be quite astonishing to him.

These verses confirm that Paul knew the Corinthians were speaking in tongues even when unbelieving Jews were *not* present. They were doing this simply to impress one another, and not for the express reason given in Scripture. Paul was not saying that they were using a counterfeit form of tongues (though some of them might have been) but that they were using the Biblical gift inappropriately.

Observation #8

"If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth." (1 Corinthians 14:23-25)

This passage connects "**unbelievers**" with the "**unlearned**." When such people attend a church service, he says, and hear members of the assembly speaking in tongues, they will naturally think the Christians "**are mad**." The Corinthians were misusing the gift of tongues and causing confusion. Unbelievers, whether Jewish or Gentile, knowledgeable or unlearned, were coming to the church to hear the gospel and they wanted to be edified by sound preaching. How could they be convinced by the truth of what they heard if what they heard was unintelligible?



Ancient ruins at Corinth

Observation #9

"How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God. Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted." (1 Corinthians 14:26-31)

Paul is taking the Corinthians to task for being so eager to display their evangelical skills that they neglected to do the one thing that mattered – edify the listener. He asks that they limit the number of tongue-speakers to two or three. If one of them was speaking in a language that anyone in the assembly did not understand, he was to have another person interpret what he was saying so that everyone was edified. If there was no-one to interpret, then that person should remain silent and pray to God.

He reminds them also that, if the Holy Spirit urges another person to speak, he may do so, but only for the benefit of all and not in such a way that he creates confusion. Each should speak, one by one, in an orderly manner.

Observation #10

**"And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints."
(1 Corinthians 14:32-33)**

Paul insists that the faculties of the saints or prophets (those who are speaking) should at all times be subject to their control. The word translated "**spirits**" is *pneuma* (Strong's 4151), meaning rational soul or mental disposition. At no time should any Christian speak in church without having full control and understanding of his words and actions – for God is not the author of confusion.

The idea that a person had to enter an altered state of consciousness or a trance of some kind in order to speak in tongues was firmly rejected. Contrast this with the modern practice, where participants appear to lose partial control of themselves.

Observation #11

"Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant. Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order." (1 Corinthians 14:34-40)

Paul is imposing a strict discipline here. He is saying that, no matter what anyone in Corinth may think – I don't care who he is – what I, Paul, say here is to be followed by everyone, exactly as it is stated. He is not forbidding them to speak in tongues, but if they do they must do so only according to his directions. The word translated **"decently"** (*euschemonos*) also means "honestly." He expects them to act honestly in this matter and to uphold the orderly precepts which he has laid out for them.

Lest anyone be inclined to contest these requirements, he adds, **"let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord."**

The Biblical doctrine of tongues

Following our examination of 1 Corinthians, as well as other relevant passages of Scripture, we are now in a position to compile a Biblical statement on tongues.

Before doing so we need to acknowledge that no-one alive today has witnessed Biblical tongues, but only a manifestation of what they assume to be Biblical tongues. This is an important distinction. Anything that we claim to know about tongues should be based entirely on what the Bible actually says. Inferences based on the modern practice cannot and should not be used to amplify or expound a scriptural reference to tongues.



The Apostle Paul by El Greco

There are a number of questions about tongues that we cannot answer with certainty from the Biblical account. For example, was tongue-speaking ever used to get around the language barrier when preaching the Gospel? Perhaps it was, but that was not the purpose for which the LORD granted the gift. Did all speakers in tongues understand the literal meaning of the words they spoke? Some passages would seem to suggest that this may not always have been the case, possibly when the gift was being used inappropriately. What factors determined which Gentile language was spoken by the tongues-speaker? Did a tongues-speaker speak only in one foreign language or did he speak in several and, if the latter, could he choose between them? Did the interpreter translate from one language into another or did he only – or in addition – expound the spiritual message conveyed by the tongue-speaker?

No doubt other questions of this kind could be asked. The very fact that the phenomenon gives rise to so many unanswered questions is strong evidence that the practice had lapsed even before the Bible was completed. **It was not a gift that needed to be fully understood by subsequent generations of Christians.**

Let's now set out a summary of what we have learned:

1. Speaking in tongues was a sign to unbelieving Jews. This was its purpose.
2. The sign was associated with God's judgment upon Israel.
3. The tongues spoken were actual earthly languages.
4. Tongues were never described as an angelic or mystical language.
5. Tongues were exclusively a gift from the Holy Spirit and could not be 'learned'.
6. The gift of tongues to the church was temporary and very likely lapsed even before the Bible was completed.
7. Tongue-speaking took place in the presence of unbelieving Jews or in a context where news of the phenomenon would reach the ears of unbelieving Jews.
8. Tongue-speaking took place in public at a church-approved forum.
9. Only a small number of members of any church could have the gift.
10. Following the misuse of tongues at Corinth, the Holy Spirit introduced a strict set of rules regarding the use of tongues (These rules may already have been in existence but were not clearly understood by the church at Corinth):
 - a. tongue-speaking must at all times be edifying, therefore it must always be interpreted or expounded for the benefit of the entire assembly.
 - b. only one person can speak in tongues at a time.

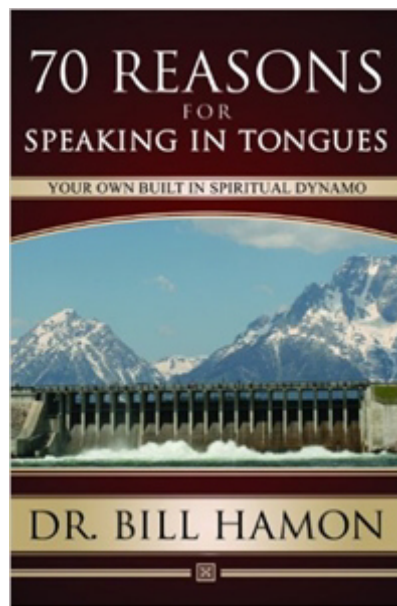
- c. no more than three people can speak in tongues at a church meeting.
- d. women were not to speak in tongues.

Implications for the modern church

If tongue-speaking is approached on a strictly Scriptural basis – as it must be – then our findings have very obvious implications for the modern church.

The modern practice of tongues violates the requirements of Scripture in at least seven ways:

- women speak in tongues;
- many people speak in tongues at the same time;
- no-one interprets or expounds what is spoken in tongues;
- the words spoken are not meaningful in any earthly language;
- more than three people speak in tongues at the same church meeting;
- quite often the tongue-speaker is not in full control of himself;
- the sign-purpose of tongues is ignored.



The New Apostolic Reformation, founded by men like C Peter Wagner, Bill Hamon and Bill Johnson, is one of the most corrupting influences in the church today. A great many sincere people are being led astray by its emphasis on signs and wonders, its heretical doctrine of Apostleship, and its many other distortions of Biblical truth. It is hardly surprising then to find that speaking in tongues is emphasized by one of its principal founders, Bill Hamon. He even calls it 'your own built-in spiritual dynamo.'

See our paper: *The New Apostolic Reformation is a Pseudo-Christian Cult.*

Ask yourself, would the Holy Spirit grant the gift of tongues under these circumstances? Given that He will not act contrary to anything recorded in His Word, we know for certain that the true Biblical gift of tongues is not being exercised in public in the modern church.

Another matter of concern is the popular Pentecostal belief that Roman Catholics (of the 'charismatic' variety) are also able to speak in tongues. Roman Catholics are not believers but look to the Pope as the representative of Christ on earth. They pray to and for the dead, kneel before idols, venerate the so-called queen of heaven, practice the repeated sacrifice of Christ, and believe they are consuming his actual flesh in the communion wafer (among many other pagan beliefs and practices). Since this is the case, how then can Roman Catholics exercise the Biblical gift of tongues? Obviously they can't. So when Pentecostals stand with Roman Catholics and speak in 'tongues' we know they are very seriously deceived.

The 'gift' of tongues in its modern form may be psychosomatic in many cases, or induced by self-hypnosis. We need to be concerned, in particular, that the same phenomenon is common among tribal religions, as well as certain Hindu cults, and that in such instances it is very likely demonic in origin.

The Coming One World Religion

When Christians reject the sole basis of their salvation – **"The just shall live by faith"** (**Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38**) – and seek further confirmation in signs and wonders, including false signs and false wonders, they are almost certainly doing themselves spiritual harm.

We can expect tongue-speaking to play a role in the coming one world religion. Despite the fact that it conflicts with Scripture it is accepted because it is 'exciting' and experiential; it is deeply ecumenical, causing Pentecostals to regard 'charismatic' Roman Catholics as fellow believers; it replaces the clear gospel message and solid preaching with ecstatic utterances and meaningless babble; it acts as a gateway into other aberrant forms of worship, including monastic contemplation and *lectio divina*; it induces many practitioners into believing that they are prophets and that they have a 'message' for mankind; and it replaces doctrine with emotion, understanding with experience, and the Word of God with personal revelation. In short, tongue-speaking is exactly the kind of charismatic phenomenon that we can expect the Enemy to exploit as he works toward creating a unified world religion.

Will Pentecostals abandon the practice? I doubt it. Just look at the titles (overleaf) of two of the dozens of books on the market teaching the 'benefits' of tongue-speaking. These authors are so convinced that modern tongue-speaking is Scriptural that they actually claim that Satan is discouraging its use.

There is virtually no discernment in the church today. For example, the Bible clearly states that women cannot speak in tongues, but Pentecostals simply ignore this restriction, just as they ignore the other restrictions that the Holy Spirit has imposed on the use of tongues. We can see from this that the basic problem with tongues in the modern church is due primarily, not to ignorance or deception, but to disobedience.

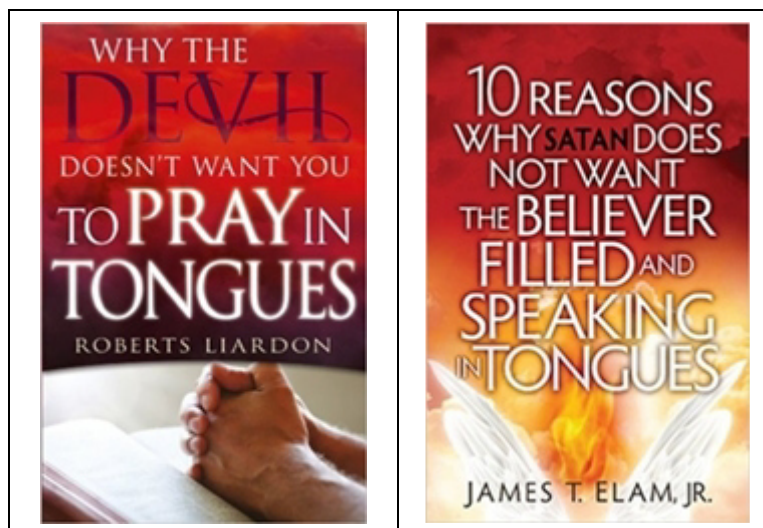
The Toronto 'Blessing'

How else could something like the 'Toronto Blessing' be tolerated? This wretched deception is endorsed by preachers from many denominations, including the Anglican clergy who designed the Alpha Course, and yet it is one the most disturbing perversions of Biblical truth in the world today. The Roman Catholic Church sponsors the Alpha Course – and by implication approves of the Toronto Blessing – because it plays a key role in her ecumenical agenda. According to the Roman Catholic Catechism (paragraph 2003) the gift of tongues is "oriented toward sanctifying grace and [is] intended for the common good of the Church." This is clear evidence that the Catholic Church will continue to promote tongues and use it to undermine Biblical truth.

The practice of tongues can lead directly to many of the phenomena seen at Toronto – shaking, trembling, barking, howling, repetitive gibberish, slaying in the spirit, hysterical laughter, crying, crawling, involuntary paralysis, falling over, convulsions, and drunken-type behavior. Video recordings of the Toronto Blessing (which are available on the Internet) show in horrifying detail what happens when seemingly sincere people reject the Word of God and chase after ecstatic or charismatic experiences.

There is definitely a spirit at work in Toronto, but it is NOT the Holy Spirit.

The Toronto spirit mocks all that is holy, all that is Biblical, and all that is edifying in righteous Christian living. It tricks gullible and disobedient 'Christians' (if that word really applies to these people) into indulging in frenzied and hysterical conduct that borders on lunacy. Satan rules in Toronto, just as he does in all places where such behavior is considered spiritual.



Hypnotism and self-hypnosis

Lest one conclude that Toronto is just an aberration, we would note that much the same kinds of phenomena have long been reported among professing Christian groups that practiced tongues. In her book, **Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia** [1972], Felicitas Goodman – who examined glossolalia in several churches – refers to countless instances of dissociation, trance, possession, and strange kinetic behavior among tongue-speakers claiming to be Christian. She comments also on the highly repetitive nature of tongue-speaking:

"...the subject keeps saying the same thing, the utterance does not vary from one occasion to the next. Instead of saying that the utterance is stereotyped, we might state that it is remembered. In the waking state, however, the glossolalist often does not remember that he spoke; he does not recall, when out of dissociation, what he said, and no subject I interviewed could repeat his trance utterance in the conscious state." [p.97].

In short, tongue-speaking involves entering an altered state of consciousness, a type of trance, where the subject no longer has complete control of himself. Once in this state of "dissociation" as Goodman calls it, the subject can exhibit increasingly bizarre behavior over which he has little or no control and no clear memory after the event of what transpired.

If the same unedifying and bizarre behavior can be induced in suggestible subjects by a seasoned hypnotist, how can any sincere believer think it is Biblical?



The Pope met publicly in June 2014 with Carol and John Arnott (far left), two of the most active and outspoken champions of the Toronto Blessing. To his right is Kenneth Copeland, who often speaks in tongues on stage. Brian Stiller (beside Copeland) is 'global ambassador' for the New York-based World Evangelical Alliance, an influential organization that is working closely with Rome to advance the cause of ecumenism.

Closing remarks by Pastor Hartin

I will close with a stark warning by Pastor Bryce Hartin:

Until recent times, Spiritism was generally discredited. Its alleged phenomena were ridiculed and its mediums denounced as imposters. All this has now changed. The practice of Spiritism in some form or other has now become acceptable in society, but even more, its emergence in the tongues speaking section of the Church has actually made it respectable. The way is thus being prepared for new ever-widening spheres of demonic activity and for the supply of new and more efficient human channels through whom these deceiving spirits may operate. Someone has well said that the partition between the natural and the supernatural is wearing thin in places. Such is indeed the case. With the emergence this century of the tongues movement with its powerful emotional hype and its psychic healings, Satan has now created for himself a new source of authority and these teachings, having now gained respectability, open the door very wide for other "doctrines of demons."

- *Today's Tongues*, 1987, p.12

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November 20, 2015

Note:

This is a revised version of a paper on tongues that was published on this website in March 2010.

For further information visit www.zephaniah.eu

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